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ABSTRACT

Ths use of Canter's (1976) Assertive Discipline program as a schoolwide response to classroom problems is gaining nationwide support. The program is designed to provide educators with the competence and confidence necessary to assert their influence and deal effectively with discipline problems. The purpose of this article is to discuss the program and review the limited research assessing its effectiveness. Although the Assertive Discipline training program has been presented to over 400,000 educators throughout the United States since its introduction, only 11 research projects have examined it. The single study in which there was experimental manipulation of classroom control methods to determine positive and negative effects of the program found a classwide reduction of two problematic student behaviors: out-of-seat behavior and inappropriate talking among third-grade students. Other research based on surveys shows a positive relationship between the program and (1) reduction in time devoted to discipline referrals; (2) improvement in classroom discipline and student behavior; and (3) improvement of teachers' and students' self-concept. A second empirical study conducted in 36 Oregon third-grade classrooms observed that classrooms using Assertive Discipline exhibited lower levels of off-task behavior than did classrooms not using the program. (RH)

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ASSERTIVE DISCIPLINE:

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ASSERTIVE DISCIPLINE: WHAT DO WE REALLY KNOW?

With the publication of the recent article entitled "Assertive Discipline: Unhealthy for Children and Other Living Things," questions are again raised about whether or not this systematic discipline program is appropriate for school classrooms. Should we . . . ? No, can we blindly accept the opinions of authors? Dan Gartrell says that he is "troubled by the growing number of districts that are using the model (Assertive Discipline) as an official policy." He describes classrooms that use Assertive Discipline as ones where students "fear . . . public punishment" and teachers are "quelling developmentally natural child reactions" (Gartrell, 1987, p. 11). Teachers who use the program tell us that they have taken control of classrooms once again, and now have more time to teach.

What do we really know about Assertive Discipline? Is it a system of negatives? Or, like the behavior of public school students, do we have a larger audience when we talk more about "what's wrong" than "what's right?" As Benjamin Bloom points out "rarely do teachers, students, and the school authorities develop a school code of behavior that is consistent from year to year, and from classroom to classroom. As a result, teachers devote more time and attention to discipline and managing classroom behavior than appears to be the case in other countries of the world" (Bloom, 1978, p. 564).

The use of Assertive Discipline as a schoolwide response to classroom problems is gaining nationwide support. This program is designed to provide educators with the competence and confidence necessary to assert their influence and deal effectively with discipline problems. We "hear" that the program works. But, is there any base in research to support implementation? The purpose of this article is to discuss the program and review the limited research about the Assertive Discipline program. It will assist parents and local administrators in answering the question.

What is the purpose of Assertive Discipline? Assertive Discipline is a method of maintaining consistent school-wide discipline and was introduced by Lee Canter in 1976 with the publication of his book Assertive Discipline: A take-charge approach for today's educator. It was written after seven years of observing master teachers. The purpose of Assertive Discipline is to prevent misbehavior rather than simply to give punishment. Its goals are (a) to increase students' time on task, (b) to minimize distracting and disruptive behavior, (c) to reduce the likelihood of more serious disciplinary problems, (d) to minimize the teacher's effort in maintaining discipline, and (e) to achieve these goals with the least possible use of serious punishment (NAESP, 1981).

Typically, when students demonstrate good behavior, it goes without acknowledgment from the teacher. Unlike what critics write (Gartrell, 1987), Assertive Discipline stresses the importance of responding assertively to good behavior.

It is the teacher's responsibility to inform the student of the choices; i.e., the consequences of choosing not to respond appropriately. The teacher selects consequences that are not physically or psychologically harmful, but ones that the student does not like (Woodstrup, 1977).

The Assertive Discipline program requires that firm, consistent limits be set for students, while at the same time it supports the students' need for warm and positive support. The involvement of both the parent and the principal is essential, and is part of the Assertive Discipline plan to which the teacher and the principal have agreed.

Some educators believe that there are certain students for whom it is appropriate to make disciplinary exceptions. Conversely, Canter and his associates (1980) claim that Assertive Discipline works with all students at all grade levels. As a result, no longer are students with emotional problems, students whose parents do not support school discipline, students from low socio-economic background, "low achievers," or "educationally handicapped" students exempt from good behavior.

How does Assertive Discipline training work? Canter's (1979) trainers instruct teachers to (a) tolerate no student stopping the teaching process, (b) tolerate no student preventing another student from learning, (c) tolerate no student engaging in any behavior that is not in the student's best interest and in the best interest of others, and most important, (d) immediately recognize and reinforce appropriate behavior.

How expectations are taught is as important as what is expected. The Assertive Discipline program suggests a variety of methods, including "the broken record." Using that method the teacher simply repeats expectations without allowing the student to divert attention. This is accompanied by a sequence of actions including direct eye contact, non-threatening gestures, saying the student's name, and perhaps a touch of the teacher's hand to the student's shoulder. The teacher uses a quiet, insistent voice and, in one or two words, directs the child back to work. The teacher remains until the child responds, then moves away and in a sincere tone says "thank you" (NAESP, 1981, p. 1.10).

Consequently, once classroom rules are established, a teacher can interrupt misbehavior without interrupting teaching. For example, the teacher writes the name of the misbehaving student on the chalkboard, or in some other non-verbal way indicates to the student that a rule has been broken. At the same time the teacher can praise another student for not doing the inappropriate behavior. This calls the student's attention to the fact that misbehavior--a breaking of known rules--is occurring. Later in the same day if a student again misbehaves, the teacher puts a check mark next to the student's name, and so on.

Some educators trained in Assertive Discipline begin the program with good intentions but fall into the trap of ignoring some elements of the program and concentrating on negatives. Consequently, Assertive Discipline may acquire a negative local reputation because it is not used as designed, as reported by critics such as Gartrell (1987).

Regular reinforcement is as important for good behavior as it is for inappropriate behavior. Accordingly, non-verbal teacher's actions, oral comments, tangible rewards, and notes sent home about good work all constitute positive reinforcement, or consequences. The important thing is that the student always knows why the positive or negative consequence is given.

Although the Assertive Discipline training program has been presented to over 400,000 educators throughout the United States since its introduction, only eleven research projects (ten dissertations and one university study) have examined it. Most literature and research about Assertive Discipline is based on descriptive designs and personal opinions, rather than experimentation. Only one study experimentally manipulated classroom control methods to determine positive and negative effects of Assertive Discipline. The only other empirical study was based on systematic classroom observations of student behavior as a primary feature of its experimental design.

In 1983, Dr. Linda Mandlebaum and colleagues at Bowling Green University manipulated classroom control and examined the results of implementing Assertive Discipline. They found a classwide reduction of two problematic student behaviors: out-of-seat behavior and inappropriate talking. The researchers implemented the program in a third-grade classroom in a midwest metropolitan school district. The classroom teacher, with 20 years of experience, evidenced poor control of student behavior prior to the institution of the program and, as

a result, was in jeopardy of losing her position. The researchers found that reductions of inappropriate student behavior were a direct result of the Assertive Discipline program. This supports Canter's contentions regarding the efficacy of the program (Mandlebaum, et al., 1983).

Other research projects based on surveys of students and teachers, show a positive relationship between Assertive Discipline and (a) reduction in time devoted to discipline referrals, (b) improvement in classroom discipline and improvement in student behavior, and (c) improvement of teachers' and students' self concept. These findings are supported by observation reports of school district teachers and administrators. School authorities in California, Arizona, and Minnesota reported that administrative time devoted to discipline referrals dropped as much as 20 percent after implementing the Assertive Discipline program (Loss, 1981; Lubow, 1978).

Teachers and administrators who attended Assertive Discipline training workshops in Minnesota, California, Ohio, Indiana, Oregon, and Texas reported significant reductions of discipline problems and improvements in student behavior after the Assertive Discipline program was implemented (Becker, 1980; Moffett, Jurenka, & Kovan, 1982; Ward, 1983; Webb, 1983). Follow-up surveys indicated that observable student behavior continued to improve after two to five years (Bauer, 1982; Becker, 1980; Crawley, 1982; D. R. Laingen, personal communication, October 12, 1984).

A primary goal of Assertive Discipline is to eliminate student misbehavior. The teacher who looks for, finds, and reinforces appropriate or desirable student behaviors, is the key to successful discipline. Beginning with a balance between the positive and negative reinforcements, the emphasis shifts to more positive reinforcement as negative behaviors diminish (B. Simmons, personal communication, September 6, 1984).

The second empirical study was conducted in 36 Oregon third-grade classrooms (McCormack, 1985/1986). The intent of the research was to analyze data about off-task behavior collected from two groups of students. One group consisted of 18 classrooms where Assertive Discipline was used and the other group consisted of 18 classrooms where Assertive Discipline was not used. The groups of teachers--those who used and those who did not use Assertive Discipline--were virtually identical.

The groups were found to have significantly different levels of off-task behavior, and the best predictor was the presence or absence of Assertive Discipline. One of the strengths of this study is that lower off-task behavior cannot reasonably be attributed to any other characteristic examined (teachers' qualifications, teaching experience, and knowledge of the subject; students' socio-economic status, ethnicity, parental influence, sex, age, and academic ability level). The mean level of off-task behavior for the group of students in classrooms where Assertive Discipline was not used was repeatedly higher than the mean level of off-task behavior for the group of students in classrooms where Assertive Discipline was present.

A third area of research about Assertive Discipline examines improvement of teachers' and students' self concepts. This link was found by Bauer (1982), Ersavas (1980), and Henderson (1982) in their doctoral research projects. Ersavas was the first researcher to use pre-test and post-test surveys in the study of Assertive Discipline. She began by surveying four elementary schools where the Assertive Discipline program was not used. She then introduced the program to the staff of those schools, and teachers implemented it. She not only found improved self-concept of teachers and students at each of the four schools, but also validated Canter's claim of improved classroom discipline.

Improved teacher and student self-concept was also reported after implementing the Assertive Discipline program in schools (McCormack, 1981; Swanson, 1984). Other positive self-concept findings were reported in 1984, when the Compton (California) Unified School District (approximately 1340 teachers) examined the results of implementing the Assertive Discipline program in an entire district.

Phyllis Schuman, a Lennox (Inglewood, California) junior high teacher with 30 years of experience, summarized the feelings of teachers and administrators, "I have seen dozens of approaches to discipline come and go. This system has done more to provide good discipline to our school than anything I've seen. We have more time to do what we are supposed to do--teach" (Moffett, Jurenka, & Kovan, 1982, p. 27).

In summary, there is evidence in the analysis of research to support the position that the effects of the presence of Assertive Discipline merit positive consideration when looking at students' off-task behavior, self-concept, and responsiblity. We were right after all!

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